Hoodlums and Folk Etymology
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Western Words

[PETER TAMONY, noted authority on American folk speech, discusses in this section various terms, phrases, and sayings that reflect the folklore and cultural history of the West.]

HOODLUMS AND FOLK ETYMOLOGY

WHEN JAMES W. MARSHALL discovered gold on January 24, 1848, in the tailrace of a mill he was building for John Sutter on El Rio de los Americanos in what is now El Dorado County, what was to become the fabled Gold Rush of the Forty-Niners to California was inevitable.

For decades the course of empire had been westward, as Bishop Berkeley versed. Although the Bear Flag Revolt began in 1845 and Captain Montgomery hoisted the American flag in the plaza at Yerba Buena (now San Francisco) on July 9, 1846, it was not until the cession of California to the United States by Mexico that much was said or thought about government. In unpoliced San Francisco of 1848, erstwhile Bowery Boys of the New York Volunteers, who had come to California after the Mexican war to assist the regular army in the work of conquest, together with Sydney Ducks, as ticket-of-leave men from Australia were termed, organized the Hounds, a gang devoted to assailing inhabitants of Latin-American origin. In 1849 this group ameliorated its name to The Society of Regulators. When in the winter of 1849 and during 1850, the Regulators broadened their outrages and depredations, their activities led to the organization of the Vigilance Committee of 1851. These vigilantes were the first to photograph criminals, thus instituting the rogues' gallery, a tourist attraction in American cities during the last half of the nineteenth century.[1]

This was the setting for the civic struggle between those who would not work or mine gold—gamblers, saloonkeepers and hangers-on, road agents and thieves, macquereaus and their women, murderers, shyster lawyers and politicians, all of whom employed their devious schemes to divest gold seekers, merchants, and the industrious of their findings and assets in the new Golconda—and the conscience and ethics of the new community. The continuing battle for law and order took on such a mili-

[1] *Papers of the San Francisco Committee of Vigilance of 1851*, ed. Mary Floyd Williams (Berkeley, 1919), p. 126. It may be of interest to note that the Gold Rush was the first happening of world-wide interest to be recorded photographically.

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tary aspect and panoply and the edge of rebellion was so nearly touched that Hubert H. Bancroft felt constrained to devote two volumes of his histories of the West to vigilantism or seizures of power by the people, ancient and modern; this work particularly details crime in San Francisco.[2] Against this backdrop, San Francisco became the habitat of what came to be called the *hoodlum* and, through a heritage of permissiveness that engendered the Barbary Coast and the current topless to bottomless nudity, has remained so to this day.

A Compendium of the Ninth Census reveals that Germans constituted the largest foreign-language group in San Francisco in 1870.[3] Contributions of loan-words from the German are detailed by H. L. Mencken in *The American Language;*[4] many of these are picturesque, but none more so than the range of those denominating the young street rowdy, the lazy and indolent, e.g., *hoodlum, bum, loafer,* and perhaps *dops.*

Hoodlum appears first in print in California in the Sacramento *Weekly Union* of February 24, 1872: "All the boys are trained as . . . polite loafers, street hounds, hoodlums, and bummers." *A Dictionary of Americanisms* records an 1871 example from the Cincinnati *Commercial* ("the bullying of the San Francisco 'hoodlums' ") and an 1872 usage in the Newton *Kansan.*[5] *Hoodlum* is said to have been employed colloquially just after the Civil War, but despite the examples cited appears to have been largely a localism until 1877. In that year, inflamed by the great labor, socialistic, and railroad riots in eastern states, particularly at Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, and Baltimore, and by a complex of local and statewide conditions that reduced half the millionaires in California to bankruptcy, the Workingmen's Party was organized by Denis Kearney. Agitation by Kearney was the mainspring of anti-Chinese persecutions; the disturbances were reported by telegraph all over the country and by cable all over the world. To curb these disorders, a "pick-handle brigade" was organized by a Committee of Safety headed by an old Vigilante.

Concerning the genesis of the word, the *Oxford English Dictionary* comments: "Hoodlum . . . originated in San Francisco about 1870–72, and began to excite attention elsewhere in the U.S. about 1877, by which time its origin was lost, and many fictitious stories concocted to account for it were current in the newspapers. . . . " George Gessner of New

[2] *Popular Tribunals*, Vols. XXXVI–XXXVII (1887).

[3] Washington, 1872. To foster the interests of these industrious people, the German Savings and Loan Society had been established in 1868.

[4] Abridged edn. (New York, 1963), p. 259.

[5] Ed. M. M. Mathews (Chicago, 1951), p. 827.

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Orleans traced the morphological and semantological features of *hoodlum* to the German dialect (Bavarian) *hodalum, huddellump,*[6] a source independently documented by J. T. Krumpelmann, who details multiple examples in German usage.[7] Unfortunately for etymology, these explanations of the word's origin have been ignored by San Francisco writers, who until recently habitually filled their space with the "fictitious stories" mentioned by the *OED.*

Until about 1900 when the great dictionaries written on historical principles, with dated examples of usage and variant spellings of words over long periods of time, began properly to illustrate the lives and deaths of words, "folk etymology," the tendency to give a more familiar form to an unfamiliar word, was the way most people coped with origins and usages of words. Because each speaker of a language is to some extent his own etymologist, fitting words into his vocabulary and experience by a process that seems to operate on the principle of least effort, word association is the door for a usage to enter the language.[8] This is especially true for a foreign word such as *hoodlum,* which can become a loan-word quickly through such association.[9]

This transmuting power of language operated to usher *hoodlum* into the American language, while the dozen or more popular accounts of its origin helped to establish it. Discussion and difference reinforced its usage to make it and its clipped form, *hood,* the most forceful term to describe a ruthless criminal for a century. Apparently if a word does not instantly put down roots, establish fertile associations in the minds of hearers, and renew itself periodically, it never blossoms into general usage but instead dies on the vine.

A half dozen or so of the folk etymologies of *hoodlum* held it to be an offshoot of a proper name, this being the most insidious form of association, popular during the nineteenth century because of the many inventions, machines, and discoveries then being made by individuals and named for them. Other etymologies suggested that the hoods worn by private military companies—which abounded in cities and often constituted gangs—was the referent; such groups wore uniforms and fantastic headgear derived from accouterments like those of the French Zouaves. Some of these delineations did not attempt to explain the *-lum*

[6] *AN&Q,* VIII (Nov. 28, 1891), 39.

[7] *MLN,* L (Feb. 1953), 93 ff.

[8] See George Kingsley Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort* (Cambridge, Mass., 1949), and "General Semantics and the Principle of Least Effort: Toward a Synthesis," *General Semantics Bulletin,* VIII and IX (1952), 7–15.

[9] An example from World War I is the transformation of Ypres to *Wipers,* while during World War II Isigny was first called *Insignia* by American troops, but evolved to *Easy Knee,* which is closer to the French pronunciation.

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suffix (proper etymologists try to account for all elements in a word), though *-um* was a popular form of word play in endings of the period (the vocabulary of doctors and lawyers was often burlesqued and Latinized, e.g., *cockalorum* and *panjamdrum,* and the young used the suffix in their pig latin confections).[10]

The most likely of the folk etymologies suggested for *hoodlum* was that the word was an enunciation of "huddle 'em," a figure of speech for the most ancient of predatory tactics—ganging up or assault on one person by many. The reason why pioneers trekked across the continent in trains of wagons was for strength of numbers, a tactic basic in the caravans that have traversed Asia and Africa since time immemorial. During World War II American soldiers in North Africa did not fear encountering an Arab or two, but if several approached, they were regarded as a gang, the feared method of criminal operation.

An elaboration of ganging up was employed by the Free Speech Movement at Berkeley. When campus police arrested a nonstudent and put him in a police car, a mob of students surrounded the vehicle, immobilizing it for thirty-two hours. On October 1–2, 1964, the top of the police automobile was used as a podium from which speakers incited crowds, thus creating a dramatic symbol in efforts to make the campus at Berkeley a sanctuary of the South American-university type. A comparable tactic resulted in a riot and the arrest of 145 hippies in San Francisco on Sunday, February 18, 1968. A near-accident involving a hippie's dog and a tourist-motorist's car caused the hippie to lie in protest in the street in front of the automobile. Defiant traffic tie-ups throughout the day brought police in baton-formations with tear gas and mace to clear Haight-Ashbury.

Minority groups have continually employed the age-old strategy in the San Francisco bay area in recent years. Menlo-Atherton High School suspended classes on September 18, 1967, because of gang attacks on students, male and female, in its corridors. On September 20, 1967, the San Francisco *Examiner* headlined, "Oakland Teachers 'Fear Their Pupils.' " *The Blackboard Jungle* by Evan Hunter was a best seller of 1954, becoming a film sensation a year later; it illustrates conditions in

[10]Conjectures about the origin of *hoodlum* have been printed in books on Americanisms for over ninety years. These are outlined by Krumpelmann (n. 7 above), who also references suggestions written to *N&Q*. Because Herbert Asbury's *The Barbary Coast, An Informal History of the San Francisco Underworld* (New York, 1933) has been reprinted in paperback, his three-page discussion (pp. 151–154) is probably the best known source of folk etymologies of the word. Robert O'Brien's "Street Gangs of San Francisco" (San Francisco *Chronicle,* Oct. 31–Nov. 14, 1949 [in seven parts]) outlines popular accounts of the origin of the word and sketches the hoodlum and gangs in several districts of the city.

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New York City where school hoodlumism by embryo Mafiosi has been reported for years.

The low esteem in which the hoodlum is held even in the underworld was voiced by Alvin Karpis after he was nabbed. J. Edgar Hoover, head of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, termed Karpis a *hoodlum*; Karpis, whose record encompassed bank robbery, kidnapping, and murder, was astonished, protesting, "I'm not a hoodlum; I'm a thief." In the weird logic of mobsters, Karpis' activities were considered a form of work, because personal effort and planning were involved. A *hoodlum* was considered lazy scum, because he worked indifferently for gangsters and killed impersonally.[11]

For San Francisco the *hoodlum* continues to be a threat. The economy of abundance that has characterized the city since the 1850's has ever attracted adventurous newcomers. In neighborhoods side by side live Italians and Chinese, descendants of people and cultures oppressed by invaders throughout recorded time. For self-protection the Chinese organized secret societies and tongs, some Italians the Camorra or Mafia. The Black Hand, a former symbol of such groups, tried to extort from their countrymen in the first years of this century, but since the city is limited in area and thus fairly easy to police, such manifestations of the old country spirit were wiped out. Likewise, the tongs were given special attention by a Chinatown squad of police so that with the development of the area as a tourist attraction and center for clothing manufacture their power waned.

Currently, however, non-American-speaking Chinese, recent immigrants from Hong Kong, have organized an admittedly delinquent youth group and in the spirit and fashion of the young in all cities have threatened to take to the streets if their several demands are not satisfied.[12] Thus, in addition to minorities from the south and below the border, plus the hippies, embryo highbinders and hatchetmen armed with modern weapons and Asian revolutionary street tactics, today confront the San Francisco police. Strangely, the least concern of the police appear to be the Mafia, or, as it is now termed, the Cosa Nostra. For some years such out-of-towners have been suspected of trying to get a foothold after they greedily observe tourists flocking to night clubs in the Italian area, one block from the old Barbary Coast, to goggle at topless girl shows. Declining in popularity, these clubs are now turning to bottomless or simulated nudity to revive the old interest and they are refilling their money boxes with the proceeds of three-dollar little-alcoholic highballs.

[11]See Walter Winchell's column, San Francisco *Call-Bulletin,* April 11, 1953.

[12]San Francisco *Examiner,* Feb. 29, 1968, p. 10/1–5, and March 3, 1968, p. C–10/1–2.

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